Producing & Consuming Public Space: A ‘Rhythmanalysis’ of the Urban Park

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Over 2.5 billion visits are made to UK parks each year (Grenspark, 2007). Hence, there is, unsurprisingly, an abundance of literature dedicated to parks, especially within the context of urban regeneration (Inroy 2000). However, little attention has been given to how these forms of social space are produced/consumed (Arasel and Bean 2010; Brace-Govan 2010; Costa and Bamossy 2003; Ozalp and Belk 2009; Sherry 2000), or about the temporality of these consumption experiences (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Calls to develop a more detailed understanding of the nature and meanings of consumption-related practices associated with park users have recently been made (Lee, Shepley, and Huang 2009), which suggests an opportunity to offer a more comprehensive analysis of the temporal consumption experiences encountered by urban park users, and the subsequent contribution to a perceived ‘sense of place’.

For many industrialised cities, the creation of urban parks in the mid-nineteenth century was seen to provide “lungs to the inhabitants of densely populated districts” (Latimer 1987, 7) and a place where the general public could take exercise. Thus, giving rise to a strong correlation between the quality of green space/accessibility to public parks and quality of life (Barbosa et al. 2007). Accordingly, changes were also made to the way that urban park spaces are being produced and managed, moving from city councils merely fulfilling the function of park caretaker to a more strategic and actively ‘managed’ role whereby planned marketing activities are created to differentiate experience of the locale and (co-)create consumer value (Warnaby 2009).

Public parks and green spaces are “by their nature multifunctional and analysis falls between different academic areas” (CABE Space 2010, 42). Therefore, drawing from sociology’s view that “space and the duality production/consumption are thus dynamic concepts based on practices” (Styhre and Engberg 2003, 116), de Certeau’s (1984) and Lefebvre’s (1991) notion of space as a “practiced place” is employed here. Moreover, as social practice is composed from daily, monthly and annual rhythms as well as natural rhythms, Lefebvre’s (2004) concept of ‘rhythmanalysis’ helps to capture more fully the embodied everyday experience of those who use or pass through the urban park space. Lefebvre suggests that rhythm exists when there is an interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy.

The multiple (poly)rhythms brought about by interactions between place, time and human (and non-human) action, help to illustrate more fully the temporal nature of urban park users’ consumption experiences. The paper concludes by discussing how our study extends our understanding of the temporal nature of urban park users' consumption experience of the urban park.